

Bridging the Business-Project Divide
Techniques for Reconciling Business-as-Usual and Project Cultures
By John Brinkworth
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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 US spelling adopted throughout. Published March 2016

Introduction

Regular and perceptive readers of this web site will recall that I first commented on *Bridging the Business-Project Divide* in the *Max's Musings* department in July 2015. I picked on the most obvious challenge for project managers, which is the tracking of project costs and hence reconciling project costing with the corporate financial book keeping records. In fact the requirements of the two are so different that the two are almost irreconcilable.¹ However, today I want to take a look at the whole book.

I must confess that on first reading this book's title, and particularly the sub-title, my reaction was: "Here we go again, another author trying to promote a new project management sideshow, off the main stream as it were." How wrong I was! Author John Brinkworth tackles the serious difficulties that every project manager and members of the project team encounter at the interface between the project environment and the Business environment that the project is designed to serve.

And it is not just a question of communication failure. John correctly identifies the source of the problems typically encountered as one of differing cultures. That is, the difference between the experience, performance and attitudes that exist in the established Business (i.e., Business-as-Usual) community and those of the transient project management team.

Then, as John takes great pains to make clear, the contents of this book are not the result of academic scientific study, but rather the documentation and advice born of direct personal experience. And, moreover, not just as an observer, but as one who has clearly been at the center of active projects, right from its early stages of idea formulation through to the final stages of product delivery and benefit ramp-up. As it says on the back cover of the book:²

"In organizations these days, there are two cultures, two sets of expectations, two languages; that of the business-as-usual organization and separately that of projects. These cultures need to work together effectively. Unfortunately, the natural side-effect of such different perspectives is misunderstanding, mutual incomprehension, and despite good intentions on both sides, *failure* to deliver desired benefits." (Emphasis added.)

As we shall see, this book covers the territory very thoroughly, throughout a project's life span and beyond, with the objective of uncovering the inter-cultural challenges, and then offering ways in which to overcome them. While the book will be of especial interest to those involved with in-house projects such as IT and similar, but also covers many aspects that are generally applicable to projects undertaken under contract, such as in the construction industry.

About the author

John Brinkworth is a management consultant who assists clients to improve their processes for project

and program management. He is also part of the associate faculty at Henley Business School. He is a Member of the Institute of Directors (IoD), a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, a Certified Management Consultant (CMC[®]), a Chartered IT Professional and an Associate of the Chartered Quality Institute. His focus is on identifying pragmatic solutions that can increase the chances of project success.³

Book Structure

The contents of this book are set out in two Parts of nine and seven Chapters respectively. It also includes an extensive Bibliography, all as follows:

1. Introduction

Part I THE PROJECT LIFECYCLE

2. Identifying a Project
3. Justification and Approval for a Project
4. Getting Started
5. Requirements
6. Design
7. Build
8. Validation and Test
9. Going Live
10. Post-Live Realization of Changes

Part II COMMON STRANDS

11. Quality
12. Planning and Execution
13. HR
14. Finance
15. Reporting
16. Benefits
17. Conclusions

Bibliography

The book has a total of 213 pages and one Appendix and is illustrated by a number of Figures and Tables. It does not include a Glossary of Terms. The book is well written in straight forward English and, as the author explains:⁴

"This book is deliberately practical and pragmatic. It is based on the professional experience of the author covering nearly 30 years of project-related work and consulting. . . . Its aim is to be of direct use to both business and project professionals [and] is written so as to be applicable to all types of project and thus uses neutral language which is slightly abstract."

However:⁵

"It is not meant to be read from cover to cover. Most readers will be at a particular stage in a project or come from a particular specialism. The relevant chapters covering that lifecycle phase and that specialism may be all that they read. That's OK – the book will still have served its purpose."

Of course, for review purposes, we did read this book from cover to cover – and enjoyed almost every page. That's because the author takes the problem of the clash between the business world and the

project world head on. Indeed, we strongly recommend that the first time any one picks up this book, they should at least first read the Introduction,⁶ because there the author sets the scene by explaining "The Business Viewpoint"; "The Project Viewpoint" and the effect of "The Interaction between the two worlds".

What we liked

We found the book very well structured, whether for continuous reading or for singling out any particular area of project management. As can be seen from the list of chapters under Part I, on the previous page, the author works his way through the natural sequence of a representative methodology covering the life span of a typical product development. Then in that part he consistently sets out, first the Business Perspective, followed by the Project Perspective, and then how he suggests that Bridging the Divide might or should be accomplished.

With the exception of the Introduction, chapter 1 and the Conclusion, chapter 17, each chapter concludes with a bullet list of any where from 2 to 15 items succinctly summarizing the Key Points of the chapter. Moreover, the last bullet in each case lists as many as 16 action items for accomplishing the recommendations of the preceding list. This rigorous arrangement enables Part 1 of the book to be used as a periodic reference, following the course of the reader's own project.

Having followed the project methodology in Part 1 of the book, it seems only reasonable that the Business side should have its share of exposure, too. So Part 2 of the book covers the "Common Strands" to be found in the Business-as-Usual side of the equation. Again to our surprise we learned a lot about the typical experience, pace of performance, and consequent attitudes, of those in the typical Business environment, all of which helps to create "The Divide".⁷ A couple of very selective examples may help to illustrate the reasons for our enthusiasm.

Here are some *potted notes* taken from Chapter 5, titled "Requirements". The author observes that:⁸

"The area of requirements is often one where expectations diverge between the business and the project, because the business is staffed by a number of individuals with a range of attitudes that are likely to span the following:

- It's obvious – I shouldn't need to explain it to you.
- Show me what's possible.
- I'll know what I want when I see it.
- I'm not sure who knows.
- There's too much to take in all in one go.
- Why do I need to read this massive requirements document?
- It's not yet certain.
- Can't we just get started?"

"Whereas from a project perspective, a good set of requirements needs to satisfy a number of criteria such as:⁹

- Complete,
- Unambiguous,
- Able to be validated,
- Prioritized,
- Traceable,

- Adjustable,
- Clarifiable, and
- Current.

After elaborating on each of these positions listed in the chapter, author John Brinkworth then recommends "bridging the divide" by using a range of techniques, also explained in detail, such as:¹⁰

- Talking
- Testing of assumptions'
- Demonstrations'
- Iteration'
- Segmenting'
- Freezing'
- Using an agreement process,
- Proof of achievement.

Of course you have to read the whole chapter to get the full depth of the advice provided.

As another example, the following are some *potted notes* taken from Chapter 9, titled "Going Live":¹¹

"From the Business Perspective, the significance of this is that the focus of power, ownership, control and action, which for many months (and maybe years) has been with the project team, moves back to the business. The business, which, might have felt that it was the junior partner in terms of actually getting things done, moves back into the ascendancy. This can be quite a challenge and an eye-opener, since habits of thought and behavior that will have built up over an extended period of time are now swept aside and the roles reversed."

"From the Project Perspective, going live can be more complex and nuanced than the business viewpoint. This reflects the fact that the project has a fuller appreciation of the nature of the deliverables that it has just provided and what needs to be done to turn them from a set of deliverables into a successful working solution. The moment the solution is made available for use, it can be said to have gone live. However, the actual usage of the solution may not happen immediately. There may be a different sort of uptake whereby usage increases gradually over time.

This may be because the solution, although built for a particular volume of activity, can only ramp up to this level of business in a series of gentle steps. Not because of system constraints, but due to the level of availability or enthusiasm of the user community, who may not all rush at once to start making use of it.¹²

This may affect when the project thinks it ought to get paid for a successful go-live and when the business thinks the project actually deserves to get paid."¹³

Here John notes that to achieve the best outcome for the go-live process, it is crucial that:¹⁴

"The go-live moment, being the most public part of the project's delivery, is one where a united front presented by both the business and the project to the rest of the world is highly advantageous. It is crucial that everybody needs to be together in terms of deciding whether the solution is right for go-live to happen. This will require a substantial series of meetings.

Depending upon the degree of partnership or animosity, there may be a benefit in using a neutral party or facilitator to ensure these meetings run smoothly and are productive."

Downside

The contents of this book are consistently laid out throughout and are well written in a clear style. This makes the book both easy to read, and also to use as a quick reference when the need arises in the reality of project life. From our own experiences on a wide variety of projects, and in a variety of organizations, we believe that the advice that John Brinkworth provides is both logical and sound. We just wish that these ideas had been presented to us years ago.

We do have one technical criticism because it is rather obvious. Part I of the book is titled "The Project Lifecycle"¹⁵ We do wish people would get used to the idea of calling it a "*Lifespan*". That's because the management of a project proceeds through time in one direction only. You cannot go back in time and do it over. What's done, good or bad, is done. There's no way of getting away from it.

However, the sequence that John has chosen for listing the progression of his chapter topics is the **Methodology** sequence required for building a particular product. And at first glance, that evidence of methodology looks very much like that required for managing the product development of information technology type products.

Then there is one criticism that we have regarding presentation. Many, many paragraphs are far too long, and are too numerous to flag individually.¹⁶ That means that in these days where the younger readers are more used to cryptic notes on a cell phone, the body of a long paragraph can get completely lost, and the intended thread irretrievably broken. Besides, there is an optimal amount of white space on a page that will make it interesting and inviting. Proof readers, please note.

Summary

At the outset of his book, John Brinkworth explains the problem of "The Divide" by exclaiming simply that: "Business and projects tend not to mix. They do not understand each other".¹⁷ The whole book is then devoted to addressing that problem in all the ways that trouble can arise as a consequence of the progressive activities of a project.

This is indeed a wonderfully pragmatic book that identifies almost all of the hurdles that every project naturally encounters at the interface between itself and its contributing stakeholders, all through its life span. By identifying the needs of both sides, John points to ways in which natural but serious differences can be reconciled. The trick is to bring both sides together both formally and informally so that a mutual understanding of each other's interests can be achieved, one that leads to trust and cooperation.

This book is well worth keeping handy, for reviewing in part as your project proceeds through its life span. This will help the reader to spot any resistance to progress that might otherwise go unnoticed, and what to do about it. We only wish that we had had the advantage of the insights provided in this book when we started practicing project management, at first in the construction industry.

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¹ See <http://www.maxwideman.com/musings/divide.htm>

² Brinkworth, John, *Bridging the Business-Project Divide*, Gower Publishing Limited, Surrey, England, 2014, back cover

³ Ibid, p. vii

⁴ Ibid, p. xi

⁵ Ibid, p. Xii

⁶ Ibid, pp1-4

⁷ Although we have worked in large organizations and small, and of varying stripes, it has always been in the context of project work. No doubt that is why we found the book so enlightening.

⁸ Ibid, p71-72

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid,

¹¹ Ibid, p113

¹² Ibid, p116

¹³ Ibid, p117

¹⁴ Ibid, p118

¹⁵ Ibid, p5

¹⁶ But for the record we mention the first three, on pages 11-12, 26, and 28.

¹⁷ Ibid, p1